

**Environmental responsibility in fashion: Analysis of advertising codes and valorization**

[Modada çevresel sorumluluk: Reklam kodlarının çözümlenmesi ve değerlendirilmesi]

[Responsabilité environnementale dans la mode : Analyse des codes publicitaires et valorisation]

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The marked by profound social and cultural shifts postmodern era, has necessitated a reevaluation of societal relationships with technology, nature, and global systems of production and consumption. Within this framework, the fashion industry, often associated with overconsumption and environmental degradation, has become a focal point for discussions on sustainability and environmental responsibility. This paper explores how contemporary socially engaged fashion brands integrate sustainability and innovation into their production processes and communication strategies. Grounded in theoretical perspectives such as Jean-Marie Floch's semiotic model and Laura Oswald's theory of brand meaning, the research examines how these brands challenge traditional consumer attitudes and redefine cultural perceptions of fashion. Through a detailed analysis, the paper highlights the personalized, postmodern approaches adopted by leading brands to reconcile environmental responsibility with consumer engagement, providing critical insights into the evolving relationship between fashion, culture, and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Semiotic, sustainable fashion, valorization, advertising codes, brand identity**Özet**

Postmodern çağın derin sosyal ve kültürel değişimlerle işaretlenmesi, teknoloji, doğa ve küresel üretim ve tüketim sistemleriyle toplumsal ilişkilerin yeniden değerlendirilmesini gerektirmiştir. Bu çerçevede, genellikle aşırı tüketim ve çevresel bozulma ile ilişkilendirilen moda endüstrisi, sürdürülebilirlik ve çevresel sorumluluk üzerine tartışmaların odak noktası haline gelmiştir. Bu makale, çağdaş sosyal olarak angaje moda markalarının sürdürülebilirliği ve inovasyonu üretim süreçlerine ve iletişim stratejilerine nasıl entegre ettiğini araştırmaktadır. Jean-Marie Floch'un semiyotik modeli ve Laura Oswald'ın marka anlamı kuramı gibi kuramsal bakış açılarına dayanan araştırma, bu markaların geleneksel tüketici tutumlarına nasıl meydan okuduğunu ve modaya ilişkin kültürel algıları nasıl yeniden tanımladığını incelemektedir. Ayrıntılı bir analiz yoluyla, makale önde gelen markaların çevresel sorumluluğu tüketici katılımıyla uzlaştırmak için benimsediği kişiselleştirilmiş, postmodern yaklaşımları vurgulayarak moda, kültür ve sürdürülebilirlik arasındaki gelişen ilişkiye dair önemli içgörüler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göstergebilim, sürdürülebilir moda, değerlendirme, reklam kodları, marka kimliği**Résumé**

L'ère postmoderne, marquée par de profonds changements sociaux et culturels, a nécessité une réévaluation des relations sociétales avec la

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technologie, la nature et les systèmes mondiaux de production et de consommation. Dans ce cadre, l'industrie de la mode, souvent associée à la surconsommation et à la dégradation de l'environnement, est devenue un point central des discussions sur la durabilité et la responsabilité environnementale. Cet article explore la manière dont les marques de mode contemporaines engagées socialement intègrent la durabilité et l'innovation dans leurs processus de production et leurs stratégies de communication. Fondée sur des perspectives théoriques telles que le modèle sémiotique de Jean-Marie Floch et la théorie de la signification de la marque de Laura Oswald, la recherche examine comment ces marques remettent en question les attitudes traditionnelles des consommateurs et redéfinissent les perceptions culturelles de la mode. À travers une analyse détaillée, l'article met en évidence les approches personnalisées et postmodernes adoptées par les grandes marques pour concilier responsabilité environnementale et engagement des consommateurs, offrant des éclairages critiques sur l'évolution de la relation entre mode, culture et durabilité.

**Mots-clés :** Sémiotique, mode durable, valorisation, codes publicitaires, identité de marque

## 1. Introduction

The postmodern era, characterized by dynamic social and cultural transformations, has prompted an intense rethinking of the way societies interact with technology, nature and global systems of production and consumption. In this context, the idea of sustainability and environmental responsibility has become key, especially in industries such as fashion, which is often a symbol of excessive consumption and environmental exploitation. The current paper examines how contemporary socially engaged fashion brands integrate environmental responsibility and innovation into their production and communication practices, bringing them together in a personalized postmodern approach. Using theoretical frameworks such as Jean-Marie Floch's model and analysis of semiotic codes against Laura Oswald's theory, the research provides a comprehensive look at the efforts of leading brands to rethink consumer attitudes and cultural meanings related to fashion.

## 2. Post-modernism

In "The McDonaldisation of Society" George Ritzer (1940- ) comments on the transition from the industrial to a new, post-industrial society. Among other things, these transitions and transformations imply a fundamental shift in focus from the production of goods to the emphasis on the provision of services. Ritzer's argument is that it should be adapted as much as possible to modern conditions and prerequisites and, once modified, include, in addition to services, products from brands with a remarkable history and providing added value to their potential and actual users. In his argument, Ritzer refers to the rise and exponential development of new technologies, the expansion and processing of massive amounts of information as hallmarks of a post-industrial society, in which the importance of professionals and scientists is increasing. It is not mechanized and standardized employment and organization of labor, which are the emblem of McDonaldisated societies, but personalized work (Ritzer, 2008, p. 43). Thus, modern society reflects a contradictory organizational development, while combining elements of both innovation and unification, (Ritzer, 2008, p. 43). The broad theoretical perspective known as "postmodernism" posits that modern society is in the process of transition to a new era that represents a profound and radical break with modernity. Postmodernism not only follows but displaces modernity. If modern society is characterized by a high degree of rationality and structural rigidity, postmodern society is perceived as more flexible, dynamic, and to some extent irrational. This framework frames postmodernism as the conceptual antipode of modernity and accordingly puts postmodern social theory in opposition to the thesis of "McDonaldisation". While the latter insists on increasing rationalization in society, the postmodern perspective emphasizes the intensification of irrational and heterogeneous elements. This creates a conceptual tension between the two visions: if we assume that we have entered the postmodern era, then the rationalizing tendencies of McDonaldisation will collide with powerful opposing forces typical of the new social dynamic.

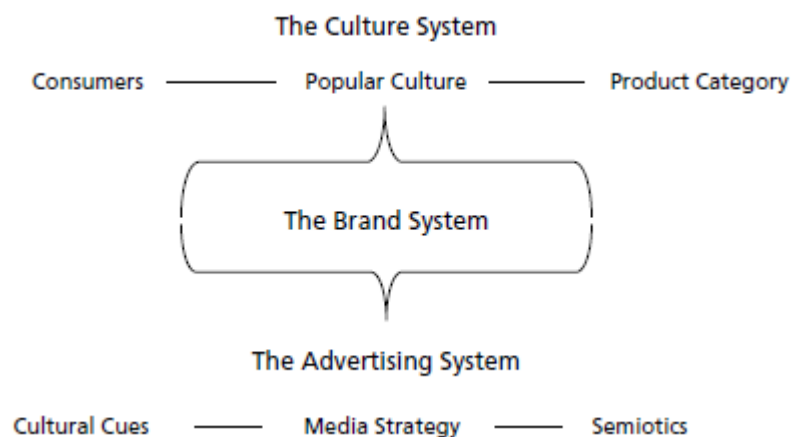
As Ritzer notes, when professionals and scientists are on the rise, the emphasis is gradually shifting from the production of products to the provision of services. However, hyper-developed markets and production systems face serious environmental problems. The fashion industry, with its mass production and often unreasonable exploitation of natural resources, is a prime example of these challenges. According to the European Environment Agency, clothing use in Europe ranks fourth in terms of environmental and climate impact, surpassing food production, household and transport. (European Environment Agency, 2022). For each person in the EU, textile consumption requires 9 cubic meters of water, 400 square meters of land, 391 kg of raw materials and causes a carbon footprint of around 270 kg (European Environment Agency, 2024). As Italian authority on fashion semiotics Patrizia Calefato (1954-) writes in "Fashion as Cultural Translation" (2021) the second most significant contribution to global pollution after the oil sector is the fashion industry. Fashion is a global system with a significant effect of introducing devastating social differences both in terms of the labor involved in garment production and in terms of the materials and processes used. (Calefato, 2021). An environmental emergency has been reached and a radical change in consumption patterns is needed to ensure negative impacts on the environment and the planet are minimized. According to information published on the environmental news site Earth.org, textile dyeing processes are responsible for 3% of the world's CO<sub>2</sub> (carbon dioxide) emissions and are forecast to grow by 50% by 2030. According to the UN Environment Programme, changes are imperative and if not implemented, by 2050 the fashion industry will spend a quarter of the global carbon budget

(European Environment Agency, 2024).

The accelerated pace of fashion trends has led to a progressive deterioration of the throwaway culture. Many clothes are worn seven to 10 times, then thrown away. In 15 years, the number of times a garment is worn has fallen by about 36%. Every year, 92 million tons of textile waste is produced, which means that every second a truck full of clothes ends up in landfill. Only 12% of the materials used in clothing production are recycled (Earth.org, 2024). The idea of conserving nature and resources brings together several designers who combine professionalism and creativity with responsibility for the environment. This can be seen as a personalized postmodern approach in which traditional values such as environmental responsibility are intertwined with individuality and innovation in design and manufacturing practices. The current work will analyze five established socially engaged brands that demonstrate concern for natural resources through the production of sustainable clothing.

### 3. Semiotic analysis of advertising communications in Oswald's theory

One of the tasks of semiotics is to penetrate the emotional intelligence of consumers, stimulating their creative potential. Consumers often express themselves through metaphors, transform social rituals, and customize current fashion trends according to their own preferences, writes Laura Oswald (Oswald, 2015, p. 5). Their behavioral patterns are subject to the impacts of social changes and stressors. These influences, far beyond rational decision-making, become catalysts for innovation in product categories, ways of use, and cultural trends (Oswald, 2015, p. 5). Advertising is, at its core, a public discourse based on shared cultural codes characteristic of the target market. These codes include both formal and cultural structures that define the meaning and presentation of goods in a given context. This socio-semiotic dimension of advertising goes beyond individual advertising, as well as the subjective experiences, memories and interpretive skills of the individual user. Unlike formalistic or phenomenological approaches, strategic semiotic analysis of advertising explores the normative aspects of meaning. It begins with the identification of the aesthetic codes that organize texts and extends to the cultural and categorical codes that structure meaning in a competitive environment. Through this process, semiotic analysis evaluates how a particular ad or brand interprets and integrates these codes. The discourse of a brand is understood in the context of its historical development and competitive distinction. That is why semiotic analysis often begins with identifying the codes that form the meaning of brands historically and competitively. Code theory not only directs advertising research towards socio-semiotic structuring of market meaning but also reduces the effect of subjective biases on text analysis. This provides a deeper and objective understanding of the communicative and cultural dimensions of advertising (Oswald, 2015, p. 40). Strategic semiotic research places the brand, not culture, at the center of cultural positioning strategy. As illustrated in Figure 1, brand identity, its values, mission, and symbolic capital act as a kind of filter or moderator that integrates cultural meanings into the brand system. For example, instead of targeting a broad and undifferentiated audience, brand management focuses on understanding the lifestyle and values of the target segment. This approach ensures more effective brand positioning in line with consumer preferences and identity (Oswald, 2015, p. 123).



**Figure 1:** The Semiotics of Cultural Branding according to Oswald (Oswald, 2015, p.123)

The brand system also guides the creative strategy and motivates the form and content of advertising campaigns. Advertising communicates the cultural positioning of the brand in the discourses related to the brand name and logo. Thus, advertising and other mass media simultaneously reflect and contribute to cultural production and simultaneously reflect and influence consumer behavior.

### 4. Communication practices in the context of sustainability: selected brand profiles

As mentioned above, the current study will affect fashion brands committed to producing and offering sustainable fashion, with

a view to all efforts to prevent and protect the planet as much as possible. The brands affected in the study include five fashion brands - Patagonia, The North Face, Ecoalf, Barbour and Vivienne Westwood.

The origins of the Patagonia brand can be traced back to 1957, when the brand's founder, mountaineer Yvon Chouinard, made his first tights for climbers, and then set up a small workshop to produce quality climbing gear. To date, the brand is well known for its use of recycled materials, including fishing nets, cashmere, wool, polyester, cotton. Nylon and polyester are also found in the jackets and gears, combined with modern fabric technologies such as H2No and Gore-Tex. A recycled down is used to insulate against low temperatures in adverse weather conditions, and the prepared fabrics are subjected to rigorous tests before being used in the final stage of product production (Trails & Freedom, n.d.).

Founded in 1966, The North Face brand positions itself as centered around the adventurous mantra of “Never Stop Exploring”, as well as being committed to producing “the best products on earth - and keeping Mother Nature, our nature and future in focus” (The North Face, n.d.). In its prosthetic processes, The North Face’s use of common materials in outdoor gear such as nylon and polyester, while integrating various technologies into its products, such as the FUTURELIGHT membrane - a tough outdoor membrane that allows air flow while also having the function of repelling water. Their other innovations include DryVent, WindWall, FlashDry and the famous synthetic insulation ThermoBall. They aim to produce products that provide waterproofing and wind resistance (Trails & Freedom, n.d.).

Inspired by the idea of creating a new generation of products made from recycled materials, but that do not differ in quality and design from those made from non-recycled products, the founder of the Ecoalf brand Javier Goyeneche launched it in 2009 (Ecoalf, n.d.). The concept, based on the rational and responsible use of natural resources in a way that limits their waste, combined with the research spirit aimed at developing innovative techniques in the production of new materials, has resulted in more than 600 innovative fabrics: recycled car tires, recycled polyester obtained from different sources, recycled cotton, light, nylon, various cellulosic fibers (Ecoalf, n.d.).

Barbour is a British brand with a history of over 125 years. It was founded in 1894 by John Barbour, who opened J Barbour & Sons in 5 Market Place, South Shields<sup>1</sup>. The brand is positioned as supporting the authentic values of the British countryside. The product categories encompass high quality jackets, coats, shirts, dresses, knits, shoes, including dog products. The use of waxed cotton in the production of many of the jackets is particularly effective. The material is particularly effective at repelling water. Protecting the wearer from getting wet is an essential quality advantage for a rainy climate. Another feature of wax cotton is the extra layer of durability, which keeps the manufactured jackets in acceptable form for years. (Unlock Wilderness, 2023).

The English fashion designer Vivienne Westwood (1941-2022), whose name is associated with the 1970s punk fashion phenomenon, used collections and catwalks loaded with provocative charge as an appeal to climate change and a platform for campaigning for a better world. Thanks to the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and the theory he expounded in “The Theory of the Leisure Class,” we know that immaculately clean clothing and the neat appearance of the wearer suggest a casual liberation from personal contact with the production process in whatever form (Veblen, 1934). The Westwood Foundation is heavily involved in socially and socially significant issues such as Climate Revolution Campaign in 2012, Save The Arctic Campaign in 2013, Switch to Green in 2017 and others (Vivienne Westwood, 2023). The above selected social activities of the designer with provocative content lead to confirmation of the validity of the statement of Veblen, as in the cited campaigns and approach, clothing is one of the tools to attract public attention on the topic of global problems.

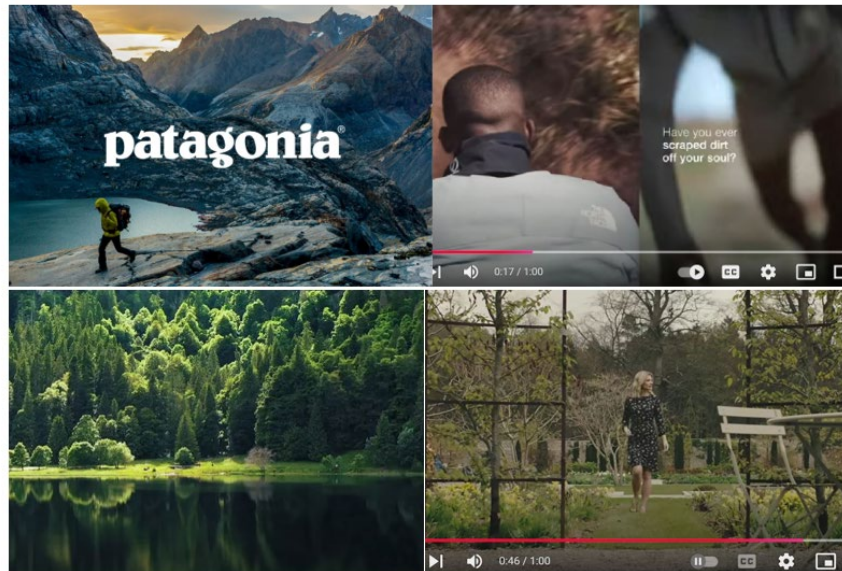
## **5. Top five key themes and codes found in advertising communications**

### *5.1. The relationship between man and nature*

In the communication strategies of the brands, an emphasis on harmony between man and nature is noted. Specific examples are shown in Figure 2, and the resulting expressive means of the code include the presence of flowers in the videos; people engaged in outdoor sports and leisure activities; shots of scenic natural landscapes. An exception to the above is the Vivienne Westwood video “Letter to the Earth”. On the eve of the annual UN climate conference, she made the announcement to highlight the need to take adequate action to protect the environment.

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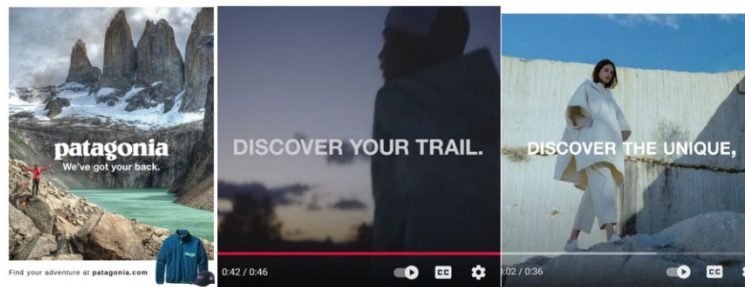
<sup>1</sup> A coastal town in England.



**Figure 2:** [Untitled examples of ads communicating the code of the relationship between man and nature, n.d].

### 5.2. *Adventure spirit and outdoor exploration*

The second identified code carries the spirit of the explorer and predominantly presents the products in the context of outdoor activities, thus inspiring users to explore nature. The expressive means of the code are similar to those of the above-described code (a person performing a sporting activity or other type of outdoor activity), however, here the verbal messages encourage exploration of nature.



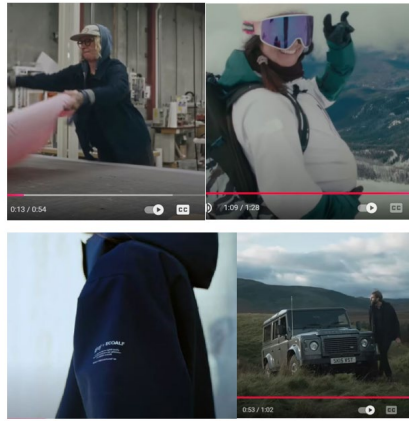
**Figure 3:** [Untitled examples of ads communicating the code of adventurous spirit and outdoor exploration, n.d.]

An adventurous spirit, delivered in a more provocative way, can also be seen in each of Vivienne Westwood's campaigns.

### 5.3. *Durability and high quality of materials*

As explained above, each of the analyzed brands is committed to producing high-quality and sustainable products, predominantly made from recycled materials or materials that leave a minimal environmental footprint. The key elements of the code are humor, representing the consumer in adverse weather conditions, transparency and a verbal listing of the materials used in production.

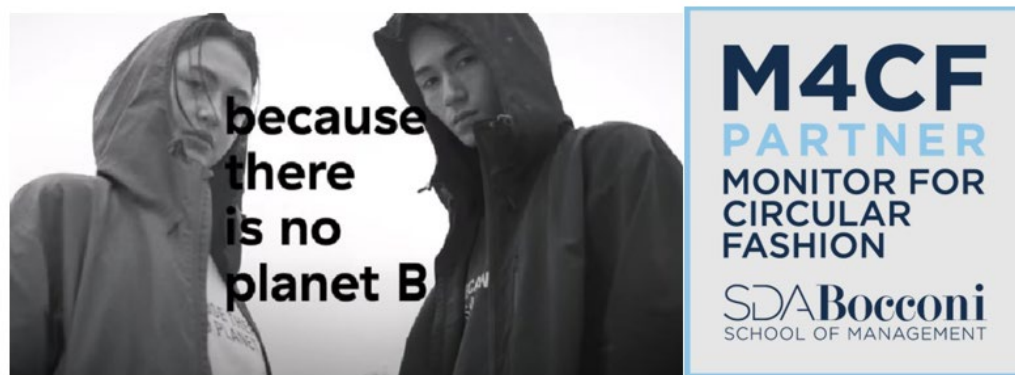




**Figure 4:** [Untitled examples of advertisements expressing the code of high quality and durability of products, n.d.]

#### 5.4. *Environmental sustainability and responsibility*

The strong emphasis on responsibility towards ecology and the environment is particularly evident in the communications of two of the brands analyzed - Ecoalf and Vivienne Westwood. As well as focusing on the use of recycled materials and sustainable manufacturing practices, the focus is on informing consumers about the environmental benefits of their products. Detailed details are available on the website of fashion designer and activist Vivienne West Wood.



**Figure 5:** [Untitled examples from an Ecoalf commercial and the collaboration between Vivienne Westwood Italy and the Monitor for Circular Fashion initiative, n.d.]

The commitment to environmental sustainability is clearly reflected in the communication strategies of the Patagonia brand. In 2011, the company published an advertisement in *The New York Times* urging consumers to carefully consider their needs before purchasing new products. The message is clearly articulated, emphasizing the importance of sustainable consumption.

## A dark gray, quilted jacket with a high collar, a full-length front zipper, and two large horizontal zippered pockets. The jacket is shown against a plain white background.

On the official YouTube channel of The North Face, the documentary *The North Face Presents Groundwork: A Family Journey into Regenerative Cotton* is available. The video follows a family engaged in regenerative agriculture and presents the brand's efforts to support sustainable cotton production as part of its broader commitments to environmental protection and a responsible supply chain.



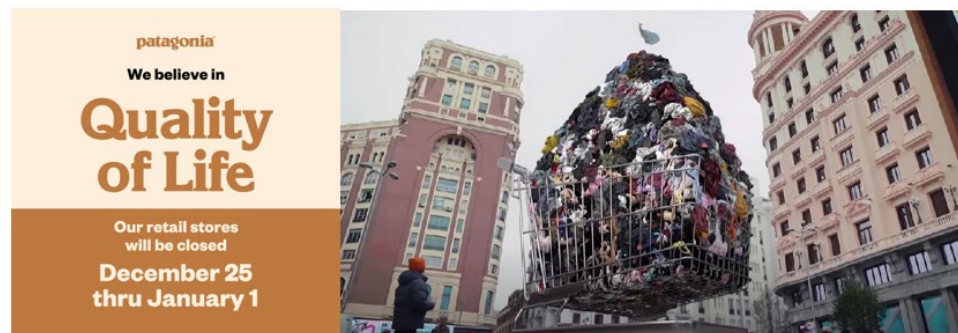
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**Figure 8:** Still from *Barbour Christmas Advert 2022: One of a Kind-ness* (Barbour, 2022).

### 5.5. Social responsibility and ethics

A well-known fact to many is the production of clothing in countries where human labor wages, as well as workers' rights, are undervalued. An example of Patagonia's commitment to social causes and ethical practices can be found in the company's support for its employees and their rights. Through its "Add to Earth" message, the brand appeals to sensible consumption by every fashion consumer, emphasizes sustainability as a guiding principle, and declares its opposition to popular Black Friday practices that encourage consumption (fig. 9). British brand Barbour communicates its social responsibility through its "Wax for Life" program, a service to repair and reseal its wax jackets, aiming to extend their life and reduce the need for frequent replacement. One of the core philosophies of the Vivienne Westwood brand is activism against over-consumption in the fashion industry (fig. 10).



**Figure 9:** [Untitled examples of content communicated by Patagonia and Ecoalf reinforcing the positioning of brands as socially responsible and ethical, n.d.]



**Figure 10:** [Untitled examples of images representing social responsibility from Barbour and Vivienne Westwood, n.d.]

## 6. Comparative analysis of communication approaches

The above examples of semiotic codes and communication approaches reveal three types of message styles - informative, emotional and provocative. Understanding what industry leaders do based on the analysis of semiotic code used describes overall behavior and what the sustainable products category "says" in general. Distinctive are the authenticity of



communication, consistency and constancy, which, as Oswald writes, are intended not for the undifferentiated audience, but are evidence of focusing on the understanding of the lifestyle and values of the target audience (Oswald, 2015, p. 122), thus the inclusion of a brand in the cultural category facilitates the dialogue between the brand and its target.

## **7. Valorization against Floch's model**

In "Legendary Brands and Economic Value. A Semiotic Approach." (Bankov, 2019) Prof. Kristian Bankov uses Jean-Marie Floch's research on the types of valorization advertising in his analysis of case studies of Bulgarian brands. Through his development, he proves that strategic brand management can be successfully enriched by the use of semiotic models. Like the analysis of Prof. Bankov, reference will be made to the theoretical models of Jean-Marie Floch. Its typology provides a valuable toolkit for considering strategic approaches in building brand value. In "Semiotics, marketing and communication. Beneath the signs, the strategies." (2001) Jean-Marie Floch (1947-2001) places an emphasis on the process through which a semiotic object passes to generate signification, that is, he explores signification as a progressive act of consumption. Within the generative trajectory of signification, he identifies two key phases. The first relates to semi-narrative structures, and the second to discursive structures. He assumes the analogy that just as every product requires a process of production, so every statement implies a statement. From this premise, he deduces the existence of a logical field for the creation of meaning.

In his methodology, Floch (2001, pp. 117-120) defines four main types of valorizations that play an essential role in the way consumers perceive the value of products:

- Practical valorization: This form of value is associated with the product's instrumental qualities, which are perceived as the opposite of basic, fundamental values. It encompasses utilitarian characteristics such as maneuverability, comfort, durability and functionality.
- Utopian valorization: This type of value refers to basic, existential values that contrast with instrumental aspects. These include concepts such as identity, the pursuit of adventure, life meaning, and individuality that transcend the utilitarian perspective.
- Ludic valorization: This value reflects the negation of utilitarian qualities, focusing on luxury, selflessness, aesthetic sophistication and impulsive pleasures. Ludic values are often expressed through sophisticated or even unusual choices that add a touch of playfulness or eccentricity.
- Critical valorization: This type of value negates existential values, giving importance to pragmatic ratios such as quality versus price or innovation versus price. Critical valorization emphasizes rational evaluation and measurability of a product relative to its value.

In view of the above information and the analyzed examples of the communication approaches of the five brands in the category of sustainable clothing, their positioning in relation to the Floch model can encompass ludicrous and utopian valorization. Characteristics of the former are the pleasure, euphoria and negation of the functional and practical, and for the latter - the association of the product with significant things in life, affected existential values and present manifestations of unexpected qualities by the user.

Communication activities play a crucial role in building brands in the cultural context and are a key factor in building a long-term dialogue between brands and their target audiences. Applied semiotics provides such a valuable methodology. On this basis, it begins to explore its place in the field of market dynamics and relations, advertising strategies, branding and understanding consumer attitudes and behavior (Трендафилов, 2012, pp. 146-153).

## **8. Conclusion**

In an era of postmodernity that combines technological advances, globalization and environmental challenges, the fashion industry faces the need for radical change. This paper examines the communicative codes and messages in sustainable fashion through selected examples from the brands Patagonia, The North Face, Ecoalf, Barbour, and Vivienne Westwood. It becomes clear that the personalized postmodern approach combines commitment to ecological practices with innovation and emotional impact. Sustainability and social responsibility are no longer just tools of brand identity, but key values that shape the dialogue between brands and consumers.

The analysis is not empirical and does not aim to provide a comprehensive strategic overview of all their campaigns, nor is it confined to a specific time frame. Instead, it offers a cultural-semiotic reading of emblematic messages that reflect the shared values and aesthetics of sustainable fashion in a postmodern context. The focus is on identifying and interpreting recurring themes within the brands' communication strategies, such as ecological responsibility, product longevity, and a consistent commitment to activism and environmental protection. Using Floch's semiotic model (Floch, 2000), one or more of these campaigns are interpreted through the lens of utilitarian and existential values, demonstrating how communication codes combine practical function with symbolic meaning. In this way, it becomes evident that such campaigns not only mirror cultural

attitudes but also actively participate in shaping them—particularly in relation to consumption, identity, and the human–nature relationship. Floch’s semiotic analysis and model demonstrate how communication codes integrate utilitarian and existential values that not only reflect cultural changes but also shape them. In conclusion, sustainable fashion is established not just as an industrial practice, but as a cultural phenomenon that responds to contemporary society’s need for a deeper connection with nature. This underscores the importance of a long-term vision for the development of the fashion industry as part of a global ecosystem that balances aesthetics, innovation and responsibility.

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